ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1

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Battling the Soviet bureaucracy to reclaim confiscated notes

By Gary Thatcher
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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WE greeted each other with an uneasy familiarity. The last time I had seen the man in the blue suit, he was overseeing a detachment of uniformed border guards who had rifled my personal effects and seized my reporter's notes and two cassette tapes.

Now, he was here to return them.

James Shumaker, the acting United States consul general in Leningrad, had received a call early last Friday morning informing me the materials would be returned.

I had come to this shabby customs building in a run-down part of Leningrad to retrieve them. At Mr. Shumaker's suggestion, US consular official Joni Davidson accompanied me.

We were ushered into a small, sparsely furnished room. The man in the blue suit looked just the same as when I had last seen him. In fact, he was wearing the same blue suit, blue gingham shirt, blue webbing belt, and blue tie with tiny white polka dots. The only thing missing was the blue-lens sunglasses he had worn back on the pier two days earlier. The smaller, older, more intense man who now joined him was a study in browns. Slowly, deliberately, he pulled two brown envelopes from his brown valise. He opened the first one and withdrew my files and notes.

The first problem cropped up almost immediately. When the materials had been seized two days earlier, I was given a receipt indicating 125 pages of documents had been taken.

The receipt was the bottom portion of an official form, which had been ripped off and handed to me. The customs authorities had retained the top portion. I had signed both the top and the bottom of the form. Now, when they were rejoined, a discrepancy was obvious. Soviet authorities had altered the top part of the form after I had signed it. It now claimed 122 pages of documents had been seized; the portion I retained said 125.

The man in brown was most upset.

"How could this have happened?" he demanded of the man in blue.

The man in blue admonished me for raising the discrepancy, saying I should have agreed on the number of documents that were seized two days earlier.

I reminded him that I had tried to number the pages myself to avoid just such a discrepancy but had been denied the request.

We recounted the documents and agreed that there were 125 pages, notwithstanding what the government's own forms said. The discrepancy in numbers showed how clumsily the form had been altered after I signed it, but there was something more. After I had agreed the material had been seized by signing the form, someone had added that the materials were of a "tendentious and anti-Soviet character."

The altered form now appeared to be a signed admission that I had tried to bring anti-Soviet materials into the country — a serious offense under Soviet law.

I protested and asked for a copy of the document. The request was denied.

I then refused to turn over the bottom portion of the form, jamming it into my pocket. The official hastily pulled back the confiscated notes and file.

I wanted my journalistic materials back and had no choice but to surrender the bottom portion of the form in order to get them. I reluctantly did so.

The other brown parcel was then opened. It contained four magazines, two tapes, and a book, although I had signed a receipt acknowledging that only two magazines had been taken. But the two officials were now pressing all four magazines and the book on me.

The book I recognized instantly. It was the 1983 Fodor's Travel Guide to the Soviet Union. A border guard had taken it from the glove compartment of my car, declaring it "anti-Soviet" because of a single phrase mentioning "tension brought about by the situation in Poland."

That was enough for the entire 466-page book to have been seized.

I recognized the two additional magazines — one copy each of Time and Newsweek — as ones I had been reading earlier but hadn't thought were confiscated.

Before I would accept them, I leafed through page by page to make sure nothing new had been inserted in the pages.

There was one light moment, as I leafed through the seized material and confirmed that some of the documents of "tendentious and anti-Soviet character" were dispatches from Tass, the official Soviet news agency.

In one, a Tass commentator in high dudgeon claimed that the US Central Intelligence Agency was trying to smuggle "subversive" literature into the Soviet Union. In another a Tass writer fulminated that the "Western mass media" were "using provocative reports of shady authors" to discredit the Soviet Union.

As I sat in that small office trying to collect my seized papers, I couldn't help noting the irony that these two Tass dispatches were considered to be "of tendentious and anti-Soviet character."

"We know," was the laconic reply of the man in the blue suit.

The session had dragged on for an hour, and I had one final matter to bring up.

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I wanted to know their names.

"Names? Hmmm, . . ." said the man in brown. He shot a quick, nervous glance to the man in blue.

"No," said the man in brown, "that will not be necessary."

I pressed harder.

After all, they knew exactly who I was, I said, and I wanted to know who they were.

"No," the man in brown replied.

I turned to the man in blue and reminded him that he had earlier given his word that I would have no further difficulties as a result of the seizure of my papers here in Leningrad. He had given me his word, I reminded him.

What good was his word, I asked, if I did not know his name? He gave no answer.

"You want to see my identification?" the man in brown asked, nearly spitting out the words. He flashed a card bearing his picture but withdrew it a split second later.

It was too quick to determine his name or the organization for which he worked.

Finally, we gave up. In the Soviet Union, it seems, even a name can be a state secret. We did, however, get the officials to admit they were representatives of the Border Guards — a division of the Committee for State Security (KGB).

As the man in the blue suit walked us out of the building, I expressed my regrets that we had met under such circumstances. He smiled.

"Perhaps the next time we meet," he said, "the circumstances will be more pleasant."

"And especially with you," he told Ms. Davidson.

With that, he reached out, took her hand, bowed, and kissed it gently. Then he turned around and reentered the shabby building to be seen no more.